

Psittacosis

(ornithosis, parrot fever)

Disease Fact Sheet Series

What is psittacosis?

Psittacosis is a disease caused by a microorganism called *Chlamydia psittaci*. It is usually transmitted to humans from birds, especially parakeets and parrots, but also from species like pigeons, turkeys, and ducks.

Who gets psittacosis?

Since this disease is spread by birds, it occasionally occurs in pet store workers or people who have recently purchased an infected pet bird. It may also be found in farmers and slaughterhouse workers who process turkeys and ducks.

How is psittacosis spread?

People usually acquire psittacosis by inhaling dust from dried droppings of infected birds or by handling infected birds in slaughterhouses. Some birds infected with psittacosis may appear healthy, but can still spread the infection to other birds or humans. Human to human spread is very rare.

What are the symptoms of psittacosis?

Psittacosis can cause fever, headache, chills, muscle aches, and sometimes pneumonia with a relatively nonproductive cough.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The period between exposure and the beginning of symptoms may range from 7 to 28 days but is usually 10 days.

Does past infection with psittacosis make a person immune?

Infection does not provide permanent immunity from this disease.

What is the treatment for psittacosis?

Antibiotics such as tetracycline or doxycycline are usually prescribed. Erythromycin is sometimes used in children.

What can be the effect of not being treated for psittacosis?

Although the disease is usually mild in humans, it may be severe, and can uncommonly result in death especially in untreated older people.

(Over)

What can be done to prevent the spread of psittacosis?

Identify the source of the human infection. If a bird is identified, investigate other humans and birds that had contact with that source bird. Exposed birds should be treated with feed which contains tetracycline. The tetracycline should not be mixed in the water. If birds are kept as pets, clean the cage often so that fecal material does not accumulate, dry up and become airborne. Current laws require that members of the parrot family which are imported from foreign countries be kept in a bird quarantine station prior to sale. During the 30-day quarantine, they are given feed containing tetracycline to reduce the risk of infection. Illegally imported birds are much more likely to carry psittacosis. Therefore, birds should only be bought from reputable sources.